"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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HUMAN ASPECTS OF RURAL LIFE IN THE FUTURE*

by T. B. Manny

The distressing times through which we have been passing stimulate considerable thought as to the basic values of rural life particularly in motives and philosophy.

I shall attempt three things in this paper: First, to restate some of the basic values of rural life which it seems to me must be conserved and if possible strengthened in the future. Second, to point out differences that exist in the two extremes of agricultural development, complete commercialization and more or less complete self-sufficiency. Third, to suggest some trends between these extremes as the probable direction of rural life during the next quarter century. The ideas expressed are my personal opinions.

Some Basic Elements of Rural Life

1. Family Solidarity and Stability. In rural areas and particularly on farms, the family unit is much more of an economic and social necessity than in urban localities. The

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*An address delivered by T. B. Manny, Senior Agricultural Economist, United States Department of Agriculture, before the Iowa Country Life Institute, Ames, Iowa, June 22, 1935.

The manuscript of this address came to the office of Christian Rural Fellowship in the year 1935. Because of its prophetic nature, we have kept it in file and are very glad to release it a quarter of a century later because of its relevance to the vision and values of the CRF.

We are sure members of the CRF will see this not as a nostalgic statement, but rather view the insights of Mr. Manny within the light of problems which are now engaging attention and concern of churchmen and other students of rural life.

I. W. M.

most characteristic farm unit is a family-size one, though some hired help may be employed in addition. In numerous ways, the homemaker and children contribute directly to the success or failure of the farm enterprise. Fewer outside interests tend to emphasize the interdependence of members of the farm family and increase the amount of their participation in outside activities as a group, not as individuals.

In sharp contrast, many city family units, especially those composed only of husband and wife, are chiefly a means of affording convenience in the details of living. Numerous activities related to the preparation of foods and the maintenance of the family in other ways usually performed in farm homes are done by other agencies for most urban homes.

Rural nonfarm families are in an intermediate position in this respect. Many rural-nonfarm families produce considerable quantities of foods for direct consumption and undertake other activities that are not ordinarily a part of urban family life.

2. Child-rearing in a Favorable Environment. The biological function was the original basis of the human family and continued to be its most important contribution to society. Greater integration of rural home life, more frequent opportunities for older children to work with parents at wholesome and productive tasks, a more wholesome attitude toward life as a result of closer association with Nature and growing things, more practical training in such virtues as frugality, foresight, planning, sharing, ingenuity, and patience; all these and many others are a part of the heritage of the average rural child.

3. Economic Security and Social Stability. While many farmers and their families have had a great deal to worry over in trying to make ends meet during the depression, their difficulties as a group have been less serious than those of many urbanites who have lost their jobs, sold most or all of their possessions to avoid seeking public support as long as possible, and finally had to accept unemployment relief funds as an alternative to starvation. Except in areas most severely affected by drought, the proportion of the population receiving relief is substantially lower, on the average, in rural areas than in the cities.

The owner of agricultural land need never be out of a job as long as he can meet whatever fixed charges in the way of taxes and interest on mortgages may be involved, even though the prices for farm products are not high enough to permit him to live in luxury. Farm tenants and laborers are not as secure economically, on the average, as are owner-operators. Legislation making ownership easier and more secure will enhance the attractiveness of rural life from this point of view.

From the standpoint of national welfare, rural life also has pronounced values as a stabilizer. Revolutions and major upheavals do not originate among land-owning farmers, large or small, who are taxed equitably, who are not laboring under debt burdens the carrying of which has been made much harder by circumstances and policies beyond the control of such debtors, and whose returns from the sale of products provides a fair level of living. Such violent eruptions usually occur among the propertyless and unemployed.

4. Opportunity for Creative Living at Home. It is difficult for me to see how modern city apartment houses, apartment hotels, or tenements offer much opportunity for creative living. Of course, some of the cultural arts and handicraft activities can be undertaken within the confines of a small unit but their number and variety are greatly restricted. Quite different is the situation of most rural dwellers. Houses are more spacious, if less modernly and expensively equipped; thus permitting more activities and entertaining in the home. Hobbies and pets can be provided for more adequately and usually at far less cash cost. If electric power is available, the rural home may be able to have many apartment conveniences at equally reasonable cost.

5. A Wholesome Philosophy of Life. Rural dwellers, living in more or less continuous face to face contact with nature and growing things, are less likely to have a distorted view of their relationship to the physical world in which they live. The concentration of wealth in the hands of the few is, on the whole, less evident in rural areas. The rush, the din, the smoke, the human hordes, the regimentation, that characterize urban life are largely absent in rural areas. Property rights are as a rule more highly respected in rural areas, and human life itself as a rule is more highly valued. The ugly side of an extremely competitive society is submerged to a considerable extent in the countryside, though modern advertising, chain stores,

radio, and more trips to larger cities are bringing many phases of this urban warfare closer to the countryside.

The Commercial Farmer or the Peasant

The two extremes are maximum commercialization in agriculture, and maximum subsistence farming or peasantry as the latter is often called. Both forms are already in existence in the United States.

1. Extreme Commercialization. The prime objective under extreme commercialization in agriculture is to achieve the maximum cash income. All farming activities are geared in with this purpose. For the farm enterprise organized in this manner, maximum volume of production seems desirable. The cycle of farm expansion often reported in the Corn Belt during prosperous times was: "Grow more corn, to feed more hogs, to get more money, to buy more land, to grow more corn, etc." Farmers go deeply into debt in expanding their enterprises and fixed costs amount accordingly. Low prices or a succession of poor crops cause current incomes to shrink below fixed costs and a mounting volume of foreclosures, tax sales, and bank failures develop in such areas.

Extreme commercialization in agriculture also has its human side. Farmers adopt the psychology of the speculator, often unconsciously. Every penny that can be spared from family living expenditures is put back in the business. Yet a high proportion of the family living is ordinarily purchased and cash expenditures for this purpose may indicate a fairly high level of living. Hours of labor on the farm, however, are likely to be extended to the limit of physical endurance in order to produce the maximum volume with a minimum of hired help. The farm is viewed mainly as a source of maximum present cash income not something to be cherished as a family heritage. Human values are submerged in a materialistic environment. Rural community institutions and organizations suffer because of the continual flow of population and wealth to towns and cities.

The foregoing may appear to many of you to be a terrific indictment of American agriculture. I intend it to be exactly that in so far as farming in local communities exhibits the characteristics of extreme commercialization. The best proof I can offer is to ask you to compare farms representing extreme commercialization and those not so highly commercialized as to the depression shock as well, better, or less successfully than those on which other considerations played a part in determining farm production plans. On which types of farms have the largest readjustments been necessary with

respect to farming practices and farm family living?

2. Maximum Subsistence Agriculture. In striking contrast to the extreme commercialization in agriculture is that form commonly known as subsistence or self-sufficient farming. In Europe it is called peasantry. Individual instances of this form occur in a great many countries but as the prevailing system of farming it is found chiefly in mountainous, cut-over, and other areas of limited natural resources with respect to agriculture. Self-sufficing farms in Iowa (those on which the value of farm products used by the family was 50 percent or more of the total value of all products) averaged but 52 acres in size with 24 acres in harvested crops.

Here is a system of farming in which the first aim is to provide a living for the family from utilizing directly the produce of the land, supplemented by a variety of production activities in the home. But little farm produce is sold for cash. Many subsistence farms are so isolated from satisfactory markets that the only ways in which corn can be disposed of is to feed it to livestock which can be driven long distances to market, or to convert the corn into liquid form and carry it out on horseback.

Although to most "outsiders," living standards of residents of subsistence farms may seem distressingly low, many of the older people on such farms in isolated areas would be as unhappy and uncomfortable in modern city or rural dwellings as urban residents would be in mountaineer cabins. Freedom to hunt and fish in nearby forests and streams, the absence of close neighbors whose rights have to be considered, the absence of added restrictions made necessary by the concentration of people in towns or cities, a carefree life without the regimentation and regularity of employment in a factory or even on a commercial farm, all these and many other things offer compensations which appeal to certain types of personalities.

Much of the small-scale farming in Europe approaches the so-called self-sufficient type of American agriculture more closely than it does our typical commercial farming, though with important differences. The European peasant landowner attaches far greater importance to the conservation of his soil resources and the improvement of his farmstead, livestock, and equipment than does the American farmer. To the former, this long-time viewpoint involves much religious zeal and a deep-seated desire to keep the farm in the family, each generation to turn over to the succeeding one a better farm than it received.

The Future of Rural Life in America

Certain human aspects implied in extreme commercialization of agriculture and in the nearest approach, we now have to complete self-sufficiency in farming, have been mentioned in order to set the limits within, which we may expect rural life to develop in this country. Much of the present section relating to the future of rural life consists of predictions which may or may not come to pass depending upon economic and social changes and upon governmental policies affecting agriculture and rural life. No doubt many of you have vastly different opinions in this connection and you may be nearer correct than I am. Only time will prove who is right.

1. Population Trends. Unless there is a rapid, substantial and sustained increase in urban employment during the next few years, I do not anticipate an early renewal of the heavy migration from rural to urban localities that characterized much of the period from 1900 to 1930.

As far as the next 10 to 25 years are concerned, it is my opinion that we may expect some increase in the number of people living on the land but with little, if any, increase in the number of commercial farmers. Depending to a considerable extent upon governmental policies, any significant movement toward industrial decentralization, will increase the number of rural dwellers, whereas the effect upon the cities is more or less problematical. Preliminary reports for the 1935 agricultural census indicate substantial gains in number of farms compared with 1930; most of these gains however, being small farms, many of which would be classified as subsistence or part-time farms, not commercial farms in the ordinary sense of the term.

2. Trends in Rural Standards of Living. If the standard of living is defined as the cash cost of commodities, and services purchased by the household plus a fair cash value of such goods and services as are secured from the farm, garden, or other source of direct appropriation, we are faced with a dual problem in making predictions for the future; first, as regards probable changes in the content of family living; and second, as regards possible changes in the price level. I do not care to take up the latter in the present connection as it may or may not have a marked influence upon the actual content of living.

Farm incomes and probably to a lesser extent rural nonfarm incomes have increased since the low point in the depression. On the other hand, many rural families for one reason

or another have not yet been able to bring their cash expenditures for living down as rapidly as their incomes have dropped. In my opinion, during the next 10 to 15 years at least, perhaps longer, a majority of the farm families, even in areas where commercial agriculture predominates, will rely to a somewhat greater extent upon commodities and services furnished by the farm than they did between 1920 and 1930. But I do not expect to see the so-called subsistence or self-sufficient type of farming replace commercial agriculture as the predominant system in the Corn Belt.

3. Rural Institutions. Unless subsidized by income from new, and largely outside sources, rural institutions (local governments, schools, and churches in particular) seem to be faced with the problem of continuing inadequate financial support from rural people. In local instances some reorganization within these institutions could increase their efficiency without corresponding increases in cost. A greater willingness of rural people to sacrifice more for their institutions through higher taxes or larger voluntary contributions will help to stem the tide of dwindling revenues.

More state and federal aid for governmental institutions and perhaps some new forms of local taxation, combined with such reorganization as may be necessary in the interest of efficient service, appears to be the most feasible solution for their difficulties. For the churches, I dislike the larger reliance upon funds raised throughout the denominations. On the other hand, arguments in support of outside aid to provide more adequate rural schools are equally valid in the case of rural churches. It is a well-known fact that urban churches derive many members and much financial support from persons reared in the country, who first joined country churches and subsequently transferred their memberships when moving to the cities.

4. Rural Clubs and Organizations. Generally speaking, those clubs and organizations requiring relatively large membership dues or other financial contributions will, in my opinion, have more difficulty in the future to secure continued support from rural people than will those which ask for relatively small cash contributions. Conversely, I believe that organizations which offer rural people definite opportunities for educational, cultural, social, recreational, or economic advancement in return for a

modest amount of cash and other forms of support, will gain members and influence in the years that lie ahead. This suggests maximum use of lay talent, as distinguished from staffs of paid specialists. The foregoing may be a discouraging prediction to many of you, and I hope that I am in error in this connection. On the other hand, the continuance of certain cooperative and local organization features in future agricultural adjustment programs, may constitute an effective urge to rural people to cooperate increasingly through voluntary organizations serving other needs.

5. Recreation and Cultural Arts. The Agricultural extension services of many States and the public school authorities as well are reporting growing demands for instruction and suggested programs and activities in these fields. Dramatics, pageantry, choruses, bands, orchestras, athletic contests of many sorts, declamation contests, exhibits of hobbies, pets, handicrafts, and other amateur productions are growing in popularity and are securing official recognition as a part of the work of adult education forces, both rural and urban. Worthwhile accomplishments are possible in rural areas where there is a desire to work for the finer things of life as well as the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter.

A Closing Word

In making predictions, one is always in danger of letting wishful thinking get the upper hand over objective facts. From several different viewpoints, social and economic, rural life may be said to be at or approaching a crisis. Some of the conditions which brough this about have not yet been changed to any extent, though progress has been made in the direction of greater stability. We are not entirely out of the woods, but we seem to be getting our bearings and moving toward the clearing. The basic values of rural life are not likely to change a great deal during the next few years, and my opinion is that they are being more widely appreciated now than they were 10 years ago. If this contention be correct, then it should follow that the more responsible class of rural people and others interested in rural affairs will find ways and means of making these basic values more effective in the years that lie ahead.